

A Year of Cooking for My Father

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“I’M NOT SURE WHICH I ENJOY MORE,” A family friend once told me, “Hearing your father’s stories or simply watching the fun he has in telling them.”

My father loved to hold his listeners in suspense, each detail polished and unfolded like a rare stone. When he reached the almost-always humorous ending, he tossed his head back with a rich, booming laugh that reverberated throughout the house and echoed his love of life.

Now cancer had weakened him to silence. Drugged for pain relief and barely conscious, we prepared to take him home from the hospital. Doctors estimated he had maybe another forty-eight hours, just enough time to get back to my mother and the rest of our family. As I looked at his emaciated form in a loose hospital gown, it reminded me he hadn’t eaten for a week.

We were a family of cooks, now grieving ones, as my mother, two sisters, and I chopped and stirred. The kitchen was a constant hive of activity as soon as my sisters arrived from out of town, each one of us focused on the sifting, slicing, and measuring of our recipes, trying to distract ourselves from soon crossing a family milestone. I had made a blueberry pie that morning—the blueberries freshly picked, the top laden with whipped cream. It was an old family recipe and to my children defined the end of a long summer day.

After we got my father into the rented hospital bed, he fell asleep, and I sat vigil in the master bedroom across from my mother. Eyes puffy from several sleepless nights, she occasionally leaned over him to whisper:

“John, you need to eat something, please? Soup and a couple of crackers? Scrambled eggs? She caressed him with words.

At any other time, they would have been mere suggestions to ensure his happiness after a long day. Now they were keys to keeping him alive. My mother was willing my father to stay in this world, to stay with her. I watched this intimacy; it had always been a part of my growing up. My father had taught my mother to cook, the two of them eventually orchestrating formal dinners and discussing recipes like two scholars analyzing Chekhov. Now, as chief food provider, she struggled with the eventual abandonment of her life partner.

My father’s hazel eyes flickered open and she tried once more:

“Anne even made a blueberry pie.”

He furrowed his brows as if trying to make sense of her question and in a thin, wavering voice, uttered two garbled words: “Booberry pie.” Not a question—a statement.

With that, I leapt out of my chair and headed straight to the kitchen, cutting a wedge of pie and returning to see my father now upright, his face pale and unexpressive. It was as if he existed somewhere between our world and a new one. Without a word, my mother took the plate from me, and began to ease gloppy forkfuls of pie into his partially open mouth, dabbing his chin after each bite as I wondered if this shell of my father was now all I’d ever know. Would this passive figure replace the assured, exuberant man I’d grown up with? Though he loved to talk, more than anyone else my father had

always been my best listener; our thoughts so similar, he was one step ahead in saying words I was still trying to form. I watched his entire strength go into eating that pie, and after an hour, he fell asleep again. My mother and I quietly left, knowing it was only a matter of time before he left us.

How wrong we were. The next day, after sleeping soundly, he sipped a smoothie for breakfast. He ate most of his dinner that night and by the end of the week, we were whipping up three meals a day. He would live, mostly bedridden, for another year.

"It was the pie that did it!" we concluded.

With that, we began cooking with a fervor as if his life depended on it, because it did. My mother and I formed a team as we weathered the days of caregiving. Food, either prepared by us or taken out from his favorite restaurants, was an all-consuming responsibility, and just looking at his face when I served up a bowl of beef stew allowed me to check the box of "gave patient joy today." His pleasure at every creation prodded me back to the cookbook shelf for another idea, another diversion for him from the boring days he spent in bed.

Each time I entered his room I was greeted with:

"Hey, kid, how are ya?" before he focused on the dinner tray. He stared at the mystery meal, as if being asked the \$24,000 Question.

A sniff or two, a narrowing of his bushy brows, and then: "Chicken Marengo," he'd announce, the self-satisfied grin sweeping across his drawn face. Next, the story:

"I remember your mother worked herself into a snit trying to make Marengo the first time—for Joe and Betty Williams. Joe was pretty old by then and I'd probably poured stiff drinks, too, but right in the middle of a

story about our early days at the company, his face fell, slowly onto his plate. He was fast asleep! Of course, we couldn't laugh or say anything, since he'd been my boss. After a moment or two, he just lifted his head, wiped his chin and I continued my story, of course." With that, my father would chuckle as he lapped up the last bit of sauce, finally exclaiming: "Wonderful!"

There were times when his back hurt, his stomach was upset or when he was just tired of being bedridden, but he rarely complained. Only one time that year did I see how much he hated his situation. He was munching on a tuna sandwich, when I asked what he'd like to do that day,

"What would I like to do?" he answered, repeating my question, eyes fiery bright. "What would I like to DO?" he said again, slightly annoyed. He stopped eating and looked at me. "I'll tell you what I'd like to do today. I'd like to get the hell out of this place. I'd like to walk up the street, go out to lunch. I'd like to drive again." He turned away from me and took another bite, chewing to a drumbeat of impatience.

I gulped, realizing how much he disliked being stuck at home, dependent on us with cancer as the prison warden. Though he appreciated my companionship and my loyalty, telling me so when I had sat vigil for days on end at the hospital, it wasn't enough. What he wanted was independence. Every day he put on a small show, pretending all of us and good food were enough. We weren't. On some level, I had known that too.

As the year progressed and he weakened, Tupperware containers stacked up in my house along with enough meals to make my own cookbook: braised chicken smothered in a tarragon gravy with leeks and carrots;

apple pie, fragrant with cinnamon and a hint of lemon; meatloaf with tangy tomato and green pepper sauce.

Sometimes I brought memorable dishes from local restaurants. He loved “Seven Element Soup,” which came from a celebrated Thai restaurant. After taking a sip, he paused and announced: “They’ve changed the recipe—there’s an eighth ingredient.” Sure, I thought, but when I mentioned this to the owner, he slowly smiled. “Ah, your father is right!” he said. “We added an ingredient but didn’t want to change the name. Tell your father we will bring the soup to him ourselves anytime he wants it. He is very much missed here.”

In fact, my father had so many restaurant fans, two of them closed their doors to attend his memorial service.

Food triggered memories for both of us. Once he mused about a pineapple upside-down cake his mother used to make. “It was the brown sugar sauce,” he claimed. “The pineapple was incidental.” I decided to create it for him the next week, tripling the brown sugar and butter so the cake wouldn’t totally absorb it on the trip across town. Still, when I scooped out a slice, the sauce had congealed and even with rewarming, it didn’t have the luxurious, buttery consistency I’d started with. He said it was delicious but I could tell he was disappointed.

As I thought about it, I knew I could never replace his memories of eating that cake on an Oregon farm, rows of tall corn outside the door. It was a time before serving in World War II—with horrors so unspeakable, he never shared them—and before losing his own father, a twenty-five-year-old brother, and finally his mother. Pineapple upside-down cake was made with the unconditional love my grandmother gave all three of her sons. It was the memory of home and of

youth. My cake would never be as good, but that was okay. We were doing the best we could—my father and I—and that was enough.

As cooking stirred up his memories, it did for me, too. The upside-down cake’s caramel sauce reminded me of how my father used to make toffee on Saturday nights, turning the brown sugar and butter mixture with a spoon, over and under, as it simmered.

“Gotta wait ‘til it thickens just so, kid,” he’d explain. “If a thing’s worth doing, it’s worth doing well.”

At home, I diced onions and whipped eggs, remembering family sunset beach walks every summer. As I toted my bag of food to the car each week, I thought about how frustrated my father was teaching me to drive. Frosting a cake reminded me of how he kept blowing his nose and wiping his eyes when he first saw me with my newborn daughter. Each dish I prepared helped to sustain him physically, and me, spiritually. Cooking was tangible love, the most elemental of ingredients between parent and child. My father had taken care of me, and now, as he slowly died, I was taking care of him. Our roles had reversed during the year and, overlaid with grief, unacknowledged.

When he finally left us, on a brilliant fall day more than a year later, I put together a memorial service with over five hundred attendees and read one of the ten eulogies.

“My father thought good food was an important part of every celebration,” I concluded, gazing over rows of family and friends. “So, please join me afterwards for a bite to eat and something to drink.” An appropriate ending it was to his remarkable life—this time professionally catered, however. ♦